

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 17, 2018

Agenda Item: Mountain Lion Management Strategy

Division: Wildlife **Action Needed:** Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 45 Minutes

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Background: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is committed to maintaining sustainable lion populations in all suitable habitats of our state. Over the last 25 years, FWP has made significant investments in field research that helps inform our lion management. With this and research done in other states and provinces, we propose to use the latest science and state-of-the-art methods and tools to monitor Montana's lion populations. Keeping in mind our goal to maintain sustainable populations, FWP has completed a draft *Montana Mountain Lion Management Strategy* as an important component of lion management. A copy of the draft strategy has been provided to the Commission.

Because we know lion populations function in big landscapes, our approach includes defining four *Lion Ecoregions* in Montana, large landscapes of similar habitat within which populations perform similarly. FWP will periodically develop estimates of mountain lion numbers within the northwest, west-central and southwest ecoregions using a genetically based field sampling method known as *Spatial Capture-Recapture*, or SCR. This is a relatively new but well-proven method for estimating populations. Using these population estimates plus our understanding of lion ecology and lion harvest data, managers will employ a sophisticated statistical model known as an *Integrated Population Model*, or IPM, that integrates all the information to predict the effects of lion harvest on populations. Over time, this monitoring program will reduce uncertainty about the effects of lion harvest and improve FWP's ability to meet management objectives.

Determining those management objectives is the next and separate step in our process. Regardless of whether the strategy, or a modified form of it, is adopted, how many lions Montanans want on the landscape and where are important questions for future lion management. Do Montanans want more, fewer, or about the same number of lions that we have now? FWP will reach out to anyone with an interest in lion management – hunters, houndsmen, wildlife viewers, livestock producers, and others – through various venues to include public meetings, social media, etc. As stated in the strategy, “FWP and the public will collectively evaluate an ecoregion's monitoring data, develop objectives, and decide on an overall management harvest prescription for the ecoregion. Managers will then recommend individual lion management unit harvests that implement the prescription, distribute hunter effort, and address local concerns.”

Public Involvement Process & Results: Jay Kolbe, the FWP biologist who wrote the strategy, has been presenting concepts and information to sportsmen's groups, CACs, houndsmen, and others while developing the strategy. Presented here is a draft strategy that puts it all in one place. The public comment period will be open from this meeting until 5 p.m. on Friday, January 11, 2019, with final Commission action in February 2019.

Alternatives and Analysis: The alternative to implementing this conservation strategy is to have no contemporary strategy. This would result in less clear priorities and more difficult communications and outreach on mountain lion conservation.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale:

FWP recommends the Commission endorse the Mountain Lion Management Strategy for public comment.

Proposed Motion:

I move the Commission endorse FWP's Mountain Lion Management Strategy for public comment as presented by the department.